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Don't Waste the Drought

By CHARLES FISHMAN

WE'RE in the worst drought in the United States since the 1950s, and we're wasting it.

Though the drought has devastated corn crops and disrupted commerce on the Mississippi River, it also represents an opportunity to tackle long-ignored water problems and to reimagine how we manage, use and even think about water.

For decades, Americans have typically handled drought the same way. We are asked to limit lawn-watering and car-washing, to fully load dishwashers and washing machines before running them, to turn off the tap while brushing our teeth. When the rain comes, we all go back to our old water habits.

But just as the oil crisis of the 1970s spurred advances in fuel efficiency, so should the Drought of 2012 inspire efforts to reduce water consumption.

Our nation's water system is a mess, from cities to rural communities, for farmers and for factories. To take just one example: Water utilities go to the trouble to find water, clean it and pump it into water mains for delivery, but before it gets to any home or business, leaky pipes send 16 percent — about one in six gallons — back into the ground. So even in the midst of the drought, our utilities lose enough water every six days to supply the nation for a day. You can take a shorter shower, but it won't make up for that.

The good news: There are a number of steps that together can change, gradually but permanently, how we use water and how we value it. Some can be taken right now.

The average American uses 99 gallons of water at home each day. In the summer, half of that water goes to our lawns, way more than needed. There's no reason to water in the middle of the day — when the sun steals so much of the water — or to water every day. The lawn-watering restrictions that cities impose during early drought should be made permanent, as Las Vegas and Fresno, Calif., have done.

Plumbing fixtures need to be smarter, and more fun. How come I can't buy a toilet that reports how much water it has used today, this month, this year? How come I can't buy a spigot that tells me how much water my daughter's shower took? If we saw the amount we were using,

we'd turn off the tap.

Building codes should be updated to require a new generation of buildings that use less water, in everything from toilets to air-conditioning systems. Zoning rules should be altered to require that all new buildings harvest the rainwater that falls on their land and roofs. The rainwater can be stored for use or returned to the ground. If a city with as primitive a water management system as New Delhi can require rainwater harvesting, so can we.

The nation's 55,000 water utilities need to redesign incomprehensible water bills with iPad-style graphics that clearly show how many gallons each customer used this month; how that amount compares to last month, and the same month last year; and how it compares to average use by families in the neighborhood. Americans are naturally competitive: customers who know how much water they consume, compared with their neighbors, typically cut their use.

Golf courses are huge, often careless users of water. In the last decade, Las Vegas strictly limited the water its golf courses could use, and while the texture of the courses has changed, the golfing hasn't. Other cities should follow Las Vegas's example.

We also need to rethink where we grow crops. Rice farmers in Texas have howled about having their irrigation water cut off. Rice farming? In Texas? Based on rainfall patterns and projections, we need to be brutally realistic about what kind of crops we should be growing, and where.

Fixing leaky water mains should be a priority of every urban water utility. There are typically thousands of leaks in a municipal water system, but new digital technology can help utilities identify the biggest ones. Congress should approve a proposed infrastructure bank that would give municipalities low-interest loans to finance capital improvements for water management.

Finally, we must get over our aversion to recycled water. Dirty water can be made as clean as you want it, and for most communities, the water they've already got in their pipes — storm water, wastewater — is the easiest, cheapest source of "new" water. San Antonio recycles almost all of its water, but it's an exception — only 7 percent of water in the United States is reused. Water recycling should be as routine as every other kind of recycling.

The pain of this drought, a slow-motion disaster, is very real. Drought can lead to paralysis and pessimism — or it can inspire us to fundamentally change how we use water. Water doesn't respond to wishful thinking. If it did, prayer services and rain dances would be all we'd need.

Charles Fishman is the author, most recently, of "The Big Thirst: The Secret Life and Turbulent Future of Water."